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Author's Note

Ok yes I know, this does follow a bit of Moon Rising's plot, at least at the beginning, but hear me out. It's only for a small part, though, and is still a lot different at the same time. I have borrowed a few conversation's general structure at the beginning as well. However, you'll find that partway through chapter 2, it basically breaks off to it's own unique plot line.

This is set essentially just after the Lost Continent (At this point)

I am still in the process of writing it, but every chapter I've posted is complete or almost there.

I own NOTHING except my OCs Darkstalker and Aurora. All rights for the drawings and pictures, as well, go to their owners.

So far, highest rankings are #3 in the category *jademountain*, #16 out of 760 in the category *dragonetsofdestiny*, and #147 out of 4,600 stories in the category *WoF*.

Hope you enjoy, please share it if you did!

Prologue

Five years before the end of the War of Sandwing Succession and the founding of Jade Mountain Academy...

Eclipse the Nightwing gazed anxiously at her egg. It had turned silver in the light of the three moons. Was that supposed to happen? What was going on? Had she done something wrong?

"Oh, what did I do? I should have stayed at the volcano with the other Nightwings. What was I thinking, laying it here in the desert?" She wrung her claws anxiously, hoping the dragonet would hatch as soon as possible.

Was that...? Could it be...

A small tapping, cracking. Eclipse rushed to the egg, wondering if she should keep it warm, or maybe bury it? She had been in the desert almost her whole life, so she had never witnessed a Nightwing hatching.

Early in her life, she had wandered into a tunnel created by Stonemover, the Nightwing animus, that led from their volcanic island to the Sandwing Kingdom. Morrowseer had found her there, but at that point she was never going back to her early memories of lava, smoke and ash. So Eclipse remained in the desert.

All of a sudden, the egg shattered into a million pieces and a tiny dragonet appeared, staring into Eclipse's eyes.

He was perfect, with smooth, shiny scales and a curved snout. But... something was odd. He had two silver scales behind his eyes, just like teardrops. Strange, but fascinating. As he looked into her eyes, he seemed to be... watching something. She shivered.

"Hello, Darkstalker." Eclipse knew his name immediately. It was perfect, he would stalk the night, like a hero. Oh, it was a perfect

name for a perfect dragonet. He would never know the horror of the island, the choking clouds of ash, the flaming sky...

Darkstalker would an example of what the Nightwings should be, not their current, starved tribe.

He would be a hero!

Chapter One - Darkstalker

[image]

"Mo*ther*, why do I have to go to school? I just want to stay here, with my friends." Darkstalker asked. He was five now, but not quite ready to leave his mother.

"Because you need formal teaching. You can't learn much about the other tribes around here." Eclipse replied, waving her talons at the oasis around them. "You need to... interact with the world!" *And to get some real teaching other than reading, and how to be around dragons, my weird little diamond.* She thought.

"I'm not your weird little diamond, Mother." He complained. Darkstalker felt perfectly fine here with his oasis pool, hut, and few Sandwing friends.

"You need to stop doing that, Darkstalker. If you can only hear something in your head, pretend it didn't happen."

As far as his mother knew, he was the only Nightwing to be born with prophecy or mind reading for generations, and he had both. He constantly heard his mother's suspicions of another power too, but she always shut those thought lines down before they could go anywhere.

Darkstalker gazed forlornly at Jade mountain in the distance. He didn't want to go and learn things. Why did he have to?

The next day, he arrived at the school. There were *so many dragons.* It seemed like his head would explode, all of those thoughts from others filling his head.

"Remember, Darkstalker, stay secret. Don't reveal anything about your powers."

"Yes, Mother." He ducked his head, wondering when he would see her again.

"Alright, goodbye, son." She kissed his forehead and flew off. *Oh, I hope this is good for him. What if someone finds out...* He caught a glimpse of a thought track that his mother had been carefully burying.

He crept down to the entrance, carefully avoiding eye contact. A pair of Rainwings flashed by through the sparse trees, over the head of a Mudwing who was thinking very deep thoughts about grapes. Off in the distance, several dragons were spiraling over a lake. Darkstalker picked his way down where another older Nightwing was waiting.

"Hello! You must be Darkstalker." The new dragon's head was filled with thoughts that were very *loud*. It made him feel both energized and yet exhausted at the same time.

She continued, "My name is Fatespeaker! I don't really work here, but I like to help organize the new students."

Darkstalker noticed that she had silver scales by her eyes, too. Was she a mind reader? He searched her thoughts, but there was nothing like that in there. Not even prophecy. Just a lot of noise.

"Let's see, Darkstalker... Darkstalker... ah, there you are. Second tunnel to the left, sixth cave on the right."

"Okay, thank you." He began nervously walking down the tunnels. He accidentally bumped into an irritable-looking Seawing, who glared at him and began thinking of several different torture methods.

That was unsettling.

As Darkstalker passed by a few cave openings, several heads stuck out and then popped back in. No one talked to him, but he could hear their unspoken thoughts.

That's him...

Why would anybody name their dragonet that...

Isn't ANYONE worried about my possible post-traumatic stress?? A

NIGHTWING named DARKSTALKER...

So weird...

Look at those scales...

What did I just eat?

Hi there. A new voice appeared in his head, clear, bright, and *very* close. Darkstalker whirled around, but couldn't find the source of the voice.

It sounds like someone's speaking to me...

I *am* speaking to you.

An instinctive bolt of fear whipped through him. All of his mother's nightmare scenarios, all of her greatest fears appeared in his head. Darkstalker tried to figure out who it might be. He stumbled and bumped into the cave wall. It was a female dragon, he decided. It was usually difficult to tell from a dragon's internal voice, but this one was fairly clear. Was it another Nightwing, mysteriously born with the tribe's original powers?

Who are you? He asked the voice.

I think you'll probably figure it out, it shouldn't be that hard.

Darkstalker shook his head, trying to settle his thoughts.
Another mind reader...

Threads of the future spun out in front of him, but he ignored them. He had tried following his visions once, and it had been too confusing and had ended quite badly, involving a lizard-filled pot, a palm tree, and a flaming coconut.

He was so deep in thought, he almost missed his cave. Another Nightwing popped out of the entrance next to his and stopped him.

"Hey, aren't you Darkstalker? Sunny told me you were coming." It was a small, very, very pretty female dragonet.

"Oh, yes, I... uhhhh..." He forgot how to speak for a moment.

"My name's Moonwatcher, but you can call me Moon. I'm so glad to have a Nightwing clawmate!"

"Moon. Moooooo–" Darkstalker cut himself off abruptly. No use doing cow impressions. "Sorry."

"Mmm. I'll see you at the noon gathering. If you need someone to show you around, ask Qibli or Kinkajou. They are some of your new clawmates, but everyone else is out hunting. See you soon!" She walked past him down the tunnel.

He noticed two things just after she left. One, he couldn't read her mind. And two, she also had teardrop scales. But the other Nightwing... (what was her name... Fatespeaker?) had not had anything involving telepathy or seeing the future in her wide-open mind and *she* had silver scales too.

Well, that was smooth, the mystery voice said, with a hint of amusement.

Oh, shush. I've lived in the desert my whole life! I haven't had a chance to meet other dragons!

I think you will like it here. If you think you saw a lot of dragons earlier, just wait until hunting is over.

More dragons? Great. I'm going to have a headache and lie in bed all day and everyone will wonder what's wrong with me and then I'll say the wrong thing and everyone will find out and THE WHOLE WORLD WILL END.

I don't think it's going to be that bad. Also,there is a way to shut out the voices.

There IS?! Why didn't you tell me before? Darkstalker slowly made his way into his new sleeping cave, trying not to outwardly show his excitement. There was a hammock, two woven reed mats, three rock ledges, and a moss bed. All but one of the reed mats had personal items on them, so he sat down on it. *So, what were you saying about being able to shut out the voices?*

Imagine the sound of rain.

I've... never heard rain.

Really? Well, how about ocean waves?

That would work. Okay, ocean waves. Here we go.

Now imagine that you are taking each dragon's thoughts and pushing them under the wave, letting them be buried in the rush of the water.

Darkstalker focused on the nearest dragon, a Rainwing who had very slow, repetitive thoughts which went basically like: *This pear tastes boring. Not like boring on the outside, just boring all the way through. Like drinking boring water. I could eat the next one, but what if that one is boring too?*

He mentally slipped the Rainwing's thoughts under a crashing wave, and it disappeared! Darkstalker decided that he should wait to try it on a group before getting too excited, though, that dragon's thoughts were almost background already. Still, Darkstalker couldn't resist giving a little jump of happiness, forgetting that he was in a cave. CRACK!

"Ow!" He landed, rubbing his head. A passing Icewing gave him a strange look.

What is that crazy Nightwing doing? I heard his name is Darkstalker,

of all things. Why would any caring mother name...

Darkstalker slipped the hostile thoughts under another wave, pushing it into the background. The faded completely, like they were never there. He couldn't wait to try it in a group!

Suddenly, a whirlwind of color burst into his cave.

"Hi! You must be the new Nightwing in my winglet. I'm Kinkajou, Moon's friend. I'm so excited about having a new clawmate! We're going to have SO MUCH FUN!"

"Hello. I've never been to a school... my name is Darkstalker," he mumbled. Kinkajou's smile or glowing pink, violet, and yellow scales never faded, but he assumed she was having incredulous thoughts inside, just like all the other dragons in school. Darkstalker also noticed that like some of the others, he couldn't read her mind. It was just a quiet, peaceful fuzz.

"Have you met Moon? She's my best friend, I think you'll really like her. Ooh, you have the same shiny scales as her! Can you read minds or see the future?" She got serious for a moment, turning a tan-orange.

"Umm..." He wasn't sure what to do. His mother had drilled into his brain to never reveal his powers, but Kinkajou clearly knew what teardrop scales meant. "I... can see the future. A bit. Not much." Darkstalker said nervously.

"Ok, that's great! At least I don't have to worry about my mind being read anyway."

Well, that's mysterious, he thought. *I wonder why she's–*

"Do you remember the comet that came by, with all the earthquakes and such?" She asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, it was really bright." He replied.

"There were some rocks that fell from that comet... wait, I have one right here." Kinkajou pulled out of a bag hanging around her neck a black rock speckled with small points of silver, like stars in the night sky. "We call this skyfire, it can block mind reading and such. Moon wanted to let us keep our thoughts private, she is SO NICE so she asked Turtle to give us each a stone from his armband he made."

"Can I see it?" Darkstalker reached out.

"Sure!" She handed it to him... and then everything went silent. All of the voices around him, all of the dragons thinking, all faded out to nothing. Was this how everyone lived? It felt like experiencing everything on a flat piece of scroll.

Darkstalker slowly gave it back to her, trying not to reveal how panicked he was. He set it in her talon, and all in a rush the voices filled his head again. It was somehow comforting to have the noise filling his brain.

Kinkajou suddenly clapped her talons to her snout. "Oh no! I forgot I wasn't supposed to tell anyone! Well, since you are our new clawmate, I suppose you should know. Just don't tell anyone, please please?"

"Ok. I think... never mind. Can you show me around?" He asked.

She went back to her blazing pink and yellow scales. "Sure! Come come come follow me." She shot out of the sleeping cave. Darkstalker hurried along after her, trying to keep up. "The entrance here is the Great Hall, we have all our big meetings and such here." Kinkajou continued. "That tunnel leads to more sleeping caves," she pointed at the first cave on the left, "And that one, the third on the left, goes to the music cave, art cave, and prey center. The one next to it goes to the small group caves, this history cave, and the library, and the last one leads deeper into the mountain, to the lakes and such. Follow me!" She rushed into the tunnel that lead to the art and music caves. "We like to have music sessions together, and when..."

Kinkajou is quite the chatterbox, isn't she? The voice asked.

I don't know what I think of her. Are all Rainwings like her? All... energetic and all? It didn't seem that way with the others. It's kind of somehow tiring.

Mmm, no. She is quite unique. Most Rainwings are pretty relaxed, except for maybe Queen Glory.

Will I meet you soon?

How do you know you haven't? Maybe you have. Or not. I'll leave it to you to figure out who I am.

Chapter Two - Moonwatcher

[image]

Moon listened to Darkstalker passing by the art cave. Poor dragon, having to stand up to Kinkajou's radiant energy and blinding scales. Moon was enjoying her role as mysterious voice, she felt that it was quite ironic that *she* would be the one speaking to the new student telepathically. She concentrated, speaking to Darkstalker.

Kinkajou is quite the chatterbox , isn't she? Moon asked.

I don't know quite what I think of her. Are all Rainwings like that? All... energetic and such? It didn't seem that way with the others. It's kind of somehow tiring.

She giggled. That was one way of describing Kinkajou.

Mmm, no. She is quite unique, Moon replied. *Most Rainwings are pretty relaxed, except for maybe Queen Glory.*

Will I meet you soon? Darkstalker inquired.

How do you know you haven't? Maybe you have. Whoops, that was the wrong thing to say. As far as Moon knew, he had only met one Nightwing. Meaning her. She quickly added, *Or not. I'll leave it to you to figure out who I am.*

Moon retreated from his mind. That had been close, she wanted the puzzle to go on as long as possible. Also, she wasn't entirely comfortable, yet, with having a potentially dangerous dragon knowing who the "mysterious voice" was.

She thought about the more recent developments. A few moons ago, a strange dragon named Luna had washed ashore, apparently from the supposedly mythical "Lost Continent", which was no longer a myth. Moon and Qibli were planning a trip across the ocean with the help of Luna, soon after she recovered. They weren't sure whether to bring their winglet, the Jade winglet, or not.

"Moon! We're back from hunting!" Qibli called, interrupting her thoughts. In he came, along with Peril and Winter. "How is Darkstalker doing?"

"I gave him the Kinkajou treatment. I would imagine that he will know just about everything about school, whether he wants to or not, by this evening." Moon replied.

"Oh dear. Make sure he survives, please. Poor dragon." Qibli put a talon over his eyes.

"Oh, stop it, Qibli." She giggled and gave his shoulder a little push. "*I* think he's stronger than *he* thinks. He can see the future and read minds, by the way."

"I have to go to a class, bye!" Peril took off.

"It seems like there are mysterious, lost powers popping up all over the place." Winter chimed in. "What's next, is he an animus too?" He shivered. "I really hope not. That would be... creepy."

"I don't think so, it's kind of hard to *not* think about your powers, and Darkstalker never even considered it. He's just kind of freaked out by a mysterious voice in his head."

"Hmm. I wouldn't happen to know this 'mysterious voice', would I?" Qibli grinned.

"Well, it's a 'mysterious voice' for reason. If I told you who it was it wouldn't be quite so dramatic, would it?" Moon put on a serious face, but couldn't hold on to it for too long. She laughed. "When do you think I should tell him?"

"Let's reveal it, if he hasn't figured it out already, when we tell him about the original Darkstalker." Winter suggested. "Then we can get it all over with at once."

Moon was just about to respond when Kinkajou walked in.

"Kinkajou, PLEASE tone that down!" Qibli covered his eyes from the fiery pink and purple dragonet. "I can't say that I've seen that color before, but it's a little–"

"Bright." Moon said.

"Intense?" Suggested Winter.

"Eyeball-scorching." Qibli confirmed.

"Oh this is just what I'm feeling right now, but if you would prefer something a little more sedate..." Kinkajou shifted to a glaring, neon green with vibrant red and violet spots. Moon almost choked.

"AHH!" Qibli buried his snout in his talons.

Kinkajou grinned. She shifted back to a slightly less intense pink. "I'm going to go swimming. Anyone want to come?"

"Sorry, not at the moment, Kinkajou," replied Winter.

"Ok, you don't know what you're missing. Bye!" She dashed out of the cave towards one of the underground lakes.

Moon, Qibli, and Winter were left standing awkwardly in the silence.

"I'm going to go read in the library." Winter swept frostily out

of the cave.

"Umm... do you want to go to the prey center, Qibli?" Moon asked.

"Anytime." He gave her a rakish smile. "I hope they have some lizards today. I think if I have to eat another fish, I will set the whole mountain

on fire."

"Let's go, come on Qibli. Ooh, and Darkstalker is headed that way too!" Moon had made it to the door when she suddenly crumpled, pain rushing through her head. A vision screamed into her mind...

Darkstalker, marching angrily down a tunnel.

Kinkajou, racing through a storm, desperately trying to escape something behind her.

Turtle facing off with Darkstalker, growling.

Darkstalker older and smiling, hopefully holding out a scroll to a

young dragonet.

Her and Qibli, locked in a dark cave.

And the worst of all: *Darkstalker, with a crown of twisted metal on his head, forcing everyone in the school to bow before him.*

Moon shook her head, forcing herself back to the world. Qibli had a wing stretched over her back, a concerned look on his face.

"What did you see, Moon?" He asked.

"Bad things." She could see that he had already figured out what she had seen. "It was..."

"Darkstalker." Qibli finished. Moon nodded, feeling sick from wings to tail.

"We shouldn't judge him too quickly, maybe that's what pushes him over. There were good visions, too. Those could happen if we just give him a chance. Still... I'm nervous." Moon said, rubbing her temples. She sat up, leaned into Qibli's shoulder and closed her eyes. "I wish we could just go for a bit *without* an apocalypse or prophecy or whatever." She sighed. "Let's go to the prey center now, I can't take any more of this."

As they walked through the tunnels, Moon searched for Darkstalker's mind. *Ah, there he is*.

What am I doing? I don't know how to paint. This looks like... I don't know, something. I wonder if I should ask Moon where the prey center is. I don't want to seem dumb though... but I'm *hungry*. Maybe I can find it myself, but I don't want to get lost... that would be even more embarrassing.

Nothing about animus powers, hidden secrets, plans to overthrow a kingdom, or really anything suspicious. But Darkstalker hadn't looked much older in the bad visions... when, and why, would he

do anything bad? And why would he be facing off with Turtle? Turtle, as an animus, would never be in any danger of attack from Darkstalker. Unless... Darkstalker *was* an animus, and either didn't know he was, or was hiding it really well.

She dismissed the idea. It was practically impossible to get as old as he was and not have found out, and how would he be blocking her so completely? Moon shook her head, refocusing on the present. She smiled up at Qibli and walked into the prey center.

For now, the dark visions retreated.

For now, all was right.

Chapter Three - Qibli

[image]

Qibli walked alongside Moon on his way to the prey center. She seemed nervous, which was easily understandable with her visions of doom and such.

She pressed her talons to her head and moaned slightly.

I wonder if I could get her something for her headache. Thorn always took swordleaf root for her headaches... but I don't think it grows here. Hmm.

Was it too much to ask for three days without a major apocalypse? All he wanted was some peace and quiet to learn and be with Moon. They still hadn't even figured out if this new Darkstalker had animus powers or not! (He was hoping not)

"Qibli, what do you think of Darkstalker? You're much better at figuring out dragons than I am, even without hearing their thoughts," Moon asked.

"Well, let me see... I will let you know what I think of him when I meet him." He grinned.
"Oh, I forgot! Sorry," She gave him a sheepish smile. "The others will meet us in the prey center later, Darkstalker should come soon."

"Ok. Are we going to tell him everything, or..." Qibli trailed off.

"Yes, everything." Moon replied. "It's so frustrating, not being able to see the future like Clearsight. According to the history scrolls, she could see almost every little timeline, every change that could happen. That would be helpful... I'm nervous about what might happen when we talk to Darkstalker." She shivered.

Qibli put a wing over her shoulders. "Hey, we'll be fine. We took care of the last one, and he had two thousand years of experience.

Besides, I'm confident that you will be able to handle whatever happens."

"Mmm, I'm still jittery." Moon said. They arrived at the prey center a moment later.

Qibli could never get over the sheer *energy* he felt whenever he walked in. Chickens, cows, sheep, pigs... you name it, it was there.. And at maximum volume. He ducked under a chicken flying by and then dodged a herd of buffalo stampeding away from a distressed-looking Mudwing.

Qibli wondered if the chaos was purposeful, given the peaceful quiet of the rest of the school. It was probably helpful to have a place for the dragonets to blow off energy, as being in the same room as eight or more explosively energetic, fire-breathing dragonets was rather uncomfortable. Especially with the recent firebomb attack... but that was all over now.

"Darkstalker should be here soon," Moon startled Qibli out of his thoughts. "I hope he has figured out the raindrop trick."

"The... what now?" Qibli had an idea of what this "raindrop trick" was, but he asked just to make sure.

"Whenever a mind reader is around other dragons, there's a lot of noise. It can overwhelm you pretty easily, especially if you've lived mostly alone for your entire life. The other Darkstalker taught me to imagine the sound of raindrops and then slip each dragon's thoughts inside each individual drop. It works quite well," Moon explained. "This Darkstalker has never heard rain before, so I told him to use ocean waves."

"Never heard rain before? Where did he live, in the desert?" Qibli exclaimed. "Ohh... oops."

"What ever happened to that steel trap brain of yours?" Moon joked, poking him with her tail. "Did it escape from its steel trap?"

"No, it's just taking a vacation." Qibli replied, grinning.

Moon laughed, "Oh you think you're so funny."

"Well, you laughed anyway..." He trailed off.

She quickly fixed her face, flicking her wings back. "What was that? Me? Laughing? *What* an assumption."

"You know that I would never entertain such a treasonous thought," Qibli said, putting on a lofty, serious expression that was immediately ruined by a flying banana.

"Ow!" He rubbed his snout where the airborne fruit had hit.

"Sorry!" A Rainwing nearby yelled.

"Every time," Qibi complained. "Every time I come in here, I get hit by something."

Moon tugged on his wing. "Come up here, we can wait for the others." She flew up to a small cave entrance, bringing him with her. Winter was already there.

"Hi." Qibli said. Winter jumped a mile, which was not something one would expect the immaculate Icewing prince to do.

Is he nervous because of the new Darkstalker? It would make sense; that name has been the nightmare of the Icewings for two thousand years. I don't think he ever wanted to hear it again. Especially on a dragon with mind reading and *prophecy. Annnnnd hopefully not animus powers.*

"Is he coming?" Winter asked. Qibli wasn't sure if putting Winter and Darkstalker and a small cave together was the best idea. The jumpy Icewing could accidentally loose his deadly frostbreath at any moment. Qibli thought that maybe, though, this discussion with Darkstalker would ease Winter's fears, assure him that this was not the original, evil animus.

"Kinkajou!" Moon called. "Hurry up!"

The Rainwing bounded into the cave, still dripping wet.

"Did I miss anything?" Kinkajou asked. "Oh, never mind, Darkstalker's not even here yet."

"Who's not even here yet?" A new voice entered the conversation.

"I spoke too soon." Kinkajou muttered under her breath. Qibli frowned inwardly, and noticed that Moon seemed slightly concerned as well. Did Kinkajou not like Darkstalker? She pretty much approved of everyone she met (well, except for the obviously evil and nasty dragons they had encountered before), so it was possible that Kinkajou saw something they all didn't.

"Perfect timing, Darkstalker!" Moon said welcomingly. "I knew you would find your way here."

"Welcome to the dark circle of doom," Qibli put in.

"Qibli!"

"Sorry."

Moon rolled her eyes and continued, "We need to talk to you about... let's just say some odd coincidences with your name and powers."

"Oh... uh, ok?" Darkstalker seemed trepidatious, and Qibli wouldn't blame him. His comment about dark doom circles had done exactly what it was intended to do: set Darkstalker just slightly on edge, enough to make him vulnerable and in need of support. Which made him less likely to attack them if the conversation went the wrong direction.

Moon began explaining the events of the past few months. She talked about the day when she had heard a mysterious voice in her head (Qibli noticed that Darkstalker flinched, just slightly, when he heard this, after all, he was also hearing a mysterious voice in *his* head) and she eventually had found out it was a two thousand-year-old animus Nightwing with mind reading and prophecy powers.

"Please don't freak out," Moon implored the Darkstalker sitting in front of her, "But... his name was Darkstalker."

The Darkstalker in the cave shifted his wings uncomfortably.

"He was the Nightwing tribe's greatest nightmare for thousands of

years," Moon continued. "When he had come out of the cave he had been trapped in, he seemed nice, only interested in restoring the tribe to its past glory and all that. Turns out, he put a spell on everyone so that they would like him, so when he started turning the Nightwing tribe into a superpowered army, no one had any problem with it. Eventually, he tried to kill the entire Icewing tribe, first through a spell, and then in battle."

"So how did you stop him?" Darkstalker asked. "It sounds like his plan was ironclad."

Moon smiled in Qibli's direction.

"Ohhh no," he said. "I don't get the credit for it."

"Yes, you do," She went on, "Qibli had the presence of mind to ask Turtle, another dragon in our winglet, to..." Moon hesitated, a nervous expression on her face. "Should I..."

"Go ahead. You can tell him." Qibli reassured.

"Turtle is an animus. Our Sandwing here asked him to enchant this earring," Moon pointed at Qibli's amber teardrop earring, "to protect himself from all of Darkstalker's spells, just in case he was, in fact, under a spell. It worked, and Qibli used Turtle's duplicator bowl to make more of the earrings while Turtle was gone. He gave them out to the school and eventually sent them to the Icewings, saving them from Darkstalker's disease spell. He also gave some personally to his close friends. They aren't necessary anymore, but I'm still wearing one." She reached up and uncounsiously touched it.

She went on to describe the various adventures that had occurred between Qibli's earring duplicating and the final battle of Icewings vs Nightwings. "When we arrived at Jade Mountain, the Icewings were already there. Winter's family was leading the army, demanding to know about the Nightwings' location. The teachers didn't know where they were, but the Icewings wouldn't take no as an answer. The Nightwings attacked right afterwards, and the battle was somewhat one-sided, with the Nightwing superpowers and all that." Moon shuddered at the memory.

"After we tried a telepathic spell to all the Nightwings that didn't work, Qibli had this amazing idea to connect the minds of all the dragons in the battle, and then teleport them back to their kingdoms."

"They accidentally teleported me back, too," Winter put in.

"Sorry," Kinkajou apologized, not really looking sorry, "We were rushing to save the world and all that."

"Moon, Anemone did the spell! I just gave her the idea," Qibli protested.

"*You* gave her the idea *word for word*, Qibli. I'd say that's close enough to doing the magic yourself," Moon replied, "Just like Darkstalker–the original Darkstalker–said: 'You have the ideas, but you lack the magic.' Of course, he offered to make you an animus right afterwards, and you wisely turned him down." She twined her tail around his, smiling admiringly at him.

Moon continued, "Right after the battle, Darkstalker captured Qibli and took him down to his cave that he had been trapped in, where, as I said before, he offered to make him an animus."

"Why did you turn him down?" The Darkstalker in front of them inquired, a curious look on his face.

Qibli shrugged. "Any number of reasons," he replied. "For one, he could have put a spell I didn't know about on me. Second, I didn't want to get power like that that was just freely given to me like that, not without earning it. Third, I didn't know how it would change me, in ways I would like or anyone would like. Power like that... it can mess up your life – permanently. I've seen it firsthand."

Darkstalker stared at him, wide-eyed. "Three moons... now that you put it that way... that changes a lot."

I hope that doesn't mean that he's an animus, Qibli thought. *There are two reasons–well, three, I guess–that he would be surprised. One, he could be an animus, and this surprising revelation is changing his opinion on his powers forever, or two, he's just startled, with his opinions*

on other *animus powers changing forever. Or three: both of those. Hmm. Number two is the most likely.*

"Anyway," Moon concluded, "Darkstalker disappeared right afterwards." She glanced at Qibli, a questioning look on her face. He shook his head.

"We aren't ready to tell anyone what happened," Qibli hedged. "I hope you'll understand."

"We'll tell you eventually, though," Kinkajou reassured.

Darkstalker nodded, a rather stunned expression plastered across his snout. "I think I'll go sit in a cave and try to sort this all out."

Moon nodded reassuringly. "Go ahead. I know it's a lot to take in all at once." He slowly made his way out of the cave, wings trembling slightly.

"Ah," she slapped a talon to her forehead, "I forgot to reveal the mysterious voice. Oh well, I'll tell him later. Hmm."

"That went... surprisingly well," Qibli concluded.

"Surprisingly?" Moon asked. "What were you expecting?"

"Visions of doom, revealing of mysterious hidden powers, maybe just your average apocalypse?"

"Don't be so pessimistic, Qibli. We'll be fine!"

Just then, a frantic Icewing burst into the prey center, screaming "WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!"

Chapter Four - Moonwatcher

[image]

The only way to describe the explosion of panic that erupted in the prey center is complete and utter chaos. Even Coconut, the least energetic dragon Moon had ever met, (which was saying a lot, since Moon had lived around Rainwings her whole life) was running in panicked circles around a pile of fruit.

"Aaaagh!" Moon crumpled to the ground (she ruefully acknowledged that this was happening fairly frequently), the sudden onrush of pure terror from the several dozen dragons in the prey center rushing in as a huge wave of thoughts that simply refused to be fit into a raindrop.

Qibli whipped off his pouch he had stored his skyfire in (that protected himself from mind readers), and began thinking the most peaceful thoughts he could muster while speaking in one calming waterfall to her.

"Focus on my voice, Moon. Just think of the rainforest, of raindrops sprinkling the forest floor, the library in the Nightwing kingdom, all of those scrolls, with that soothing, um, scrollish smell. Just remember when we..." Qibli's thoughts were basically the same on the same track, with interjections of concern for her and for the rest of the dragons outside.

He had already ruled out several known dangers and suspects, such as Peril, Scarlet, Darkstalker (the original), and animus attack, and a few others.

How he managed to process so much at once, especially without panicking, was beyond her.

When Moon had gotten the wave of panic under control, she smiled up gratefully up at Qibli, sending him a silent "thank you". He nodded and dashed outside to see what was going on.

There were exactly five living things in the main prey center cave.

One chicken, two very confused cows, one unconscious Icewing, and one Qibli.

"Everyone is gone," he said. "I would guess to their various hiding places in the mountain; we've had enough disasters that I wouldn't blame them for making some places to stay, or at least feel, safe."

Winter asked the logical question: "What are they needing to feel safe from?"

"Not sure," Qibli replied. "Let's ask her after she wakes up." He pointed at the Icewing. "After all, she did see or hear about the danger."

"Why don't we just wake him up now?" Moon asked.

Kinkajou, on the other hand, was way ahead of them. She began vigorously poking, prodding, and shaking the inert Icewing (Moon remembered that her name was Aurora) with enough energy to wake the whole continent.

"Yikes! What the... what happened?" She regained consciousness with an eyeful of a Rainwing glowing just as brightly as the waves of light Aurora's name suggested.

It was enough to give anyone a brain overload.

Aurora sat up, rubbing her eyes with her talons groggily and resettling her tail in a rattle of spikes. "I remember talking to that Icewing, Changbai, about the other new dragons who showed up when I did..." She trailed off, the rest of the story obviously coming back to her. "Oh no we HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE THE WORLD IS ENDING!"

Qibli walked up to her and grabbed her shoulder. "Please calm down and tell us why and when the world is ending."

"Darkstalker!" Aurora gasped. "He's back!"

Moon heard Qibli run through a momentary moment of confusion,

and then he quickly sorted it out.
"Actually... there *is* a Nightwing named Darkstalker who just arrived, but I guarantee that he is not the evil Darkstalker. He's just a student who was unfortunate enough to be named as such." Qibli explained. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Aurora," she said. "Are you sure he isn't really Darkstalker?"

"Yes. I met him already, he's in my winglet." Qibli responded, looking amused.

"Wait," Aurora put up a talon, "Which winglet are you in?"

"The Jade winglet. Oh... I think..." he trailed off, suddenly remembering something.

"That's my winglet!" She said enthusiastically. Qibli noticed how Winter seemed to perk up when she said that.

Moon heard him think, *It's either that he's just happy to have an Icewing clawmate... or...*

Moon looked at him, eyebrows raised. Qibli nodded. It would be good for Winter, he'd had enough disappointment.

"Oh... that means Darkstalker's in my winglet too," Aurora realized, eyes widening.

"Don't worry, he's totally ok!" Kinkajou said reassuringly (although, it seemed that she was reassuring herself, too), "I think you'll like that he doesn't talk a lot, I've been told I do enough talking for five dragons."

"You have *no* idea," Winter rolled his eyes.

"Well, you don't talk much either," Kinkajou told him, "Neither does Moon, or Turtle, or Qibli, really. So who has to do the chatting for all of us? Me."

"Ok, hold on," Aurora put her talon up again, "I need to get some names."

"Prince Winter, at your service," Winter decided to insert himself into the conversation at that moment.

"Oh, please. Just call him Winter or his head will swell so big it won't fit through the tunnels," Qibli joked. "My name's Qibli, by the way."

"I'm Moonwatcher, but you can call me Moon," Moon said welcomingly.

"Another one of us is Turtle," said Qibli

"Where?" Aurora whirled around. "I love turtles!"

"No, his *name* is Turtle."

"Oh. Does he look like a turtle?

"Nope."

"Why is he named that then?"

"I don't know, you can take that up with his mother."

"Who just happens to be the queen, by the way," Kinkajou said imperiously.

"You're kidding, right?" Aurora looked skeptical. "Two princes in one winglet?"

"No, he actually is a prince, despite his close resemblance to a sea slug." Kinkajou giggled.

Qibli just rolled his eyes.

"Goodness gracious, we're just doing introductions," Moon scolded, exasperated. "The incandescent Rainwing is Kinkajou, and that concludes our crazy circus of trying to stay on topic."

"Where is Turtle right now? Swimming?" Aurora asked.

"No, he's in the Kingdom of the Sea with his sister. Apparently she's having some sort of crisis," said Moon.

Aurora looked somewhat baffled. That wasn't surprising, their conversations were enough to to render any dragon into a state of confusion and/or paralysis.

"I'll show you to our cave," Winter guided her out of the prey center.

"Is it my imagination, or is Winter..." Kinkajou trailed off, which was unlike her.

"Yes," Moon replied, beaming. "It's about time."

"He'd better tone down the 'I'm a prince, deal with it' aura, though," Qibli observed. "Unless you've really got to know him, it makes him seem so... aloof."

"We'll see," Moon concluded.

"Well," Qibli put in with his best Turtle voice, "I don't know about you guys, but I need a nap."

The laughter that followed was quickly silenced by an explosion.

Chapter Five - Qibli

[image]

"Oh no, not again!" Kinkajou turned a pale green, the Rainwing color of fear.

"Why does this keep happening? There is literally no reason to attack the school! Who holds a grudge against this place?" Moon whirled frantically towards Qibli.

"Umm... I'm not sure," he admitted, "Let me think..." He mentally crossed off Scarlet, the Talons of Power, Darkstalker (the old one), and quite a few others. "Should we go figure out what happened, or stay here?"

"Stay here! Please please please, let's stay here," Kinkajou begged. One could never accuse her of not being brave, but she had just cause to be nervous, given her last explosive experience.

"You all stay here, I'll go see what's going on," Qibli decided.

"I'll come too," Moon volunteered.

"You're sure you want to come?" Qibli asked Moon. "I'd never forgive myself if you got hurt or..."

"Oh shush, I'll be fine," Moon said resolutely, "Besides, we made it through the last end of the world. This *can't* be any worse."

He didn't doubt her ability to take care of herself, it was just the fact that the danger was from an unknown source that made him nervous.

Just before the left the prey center, Kinkajou called out to them.

"Hey, wait up," She was dashing towards them. "You wouldn't let me miss out on all the fun now, would you? I don't know what came over me. We're a team, right?"

"Of course, Kinkajou!" Moon beamed. "Let's go."

Qibli expected to see quite a few different things. One thing, for example, was dragonets running in panic through the tunnels. Another thing he expected was smoke billowing out of a cave.

What he did *not* expect to see was Darkstalker facing off with an irritable Seawing with only a trace of smoke in the air. Fortunately for Moon's prophetic visions, this was not Turtle he was growling at. Qibli recognized the dragon as Pike, a rather unfriendly Seawing dragonet sent by the queen to guard Anemone, her daughter. Still... it was uncomfortably close the vision Moon had seen.

"Darkstalker!" Moon cried. "What's going on?"

"This SEAWING tried to KILL ME!" He yelled, eyes still focused on Pike. This was a side to Darkstalker that Qibli had not expected to see, at least not this quickly. He seemed more quiet and reserved than others. Although, when one's life is threatened by another dragon, one tends to grow rather angry, despite the possibly accidental nature of the threat.

"I most CERTAINLY did NOT," Pike growled, quite miffed.

"Would you two just CALM DOWN," Qibli said loudly, "And explain what's going on here!" This was the second time today that this sort of situation had come up. Couldn't a dragon get a break?

"I walked into this cave," Darkstalker began, "And the Seawing here lit a fuse as soon as I walked in and made... whatever was in that bowl explode!"

"I was *trying* to make some defenses in case we had another... um... incident. This isn't supposed to hurt anyone, just to scare them off!" Pike explained.

"Well, it certainly worked," Qibli put in. "You scared off the

whole school!"

"Why, may I ask, were you doing it inside?" Moon asked.

"I second that," Qibli said.

"It's too cold outside," Pike mumbled.

"Too cold!" Darkstalker cried incredulously, smoke pouring out of his snout. "You could have killed me!"

"Darkstalker," Moon warned. Qibli imagined that this was sort of an amusing situation for her (and at the same time, not). First it was the original Darkstalker giving her advice and caution, but now Darkstalker the Second was on the receiving end. Granted, this wasn't *actually* the original, but even so...

Qibli's thoughts were interrupted by Darkstalker (Number Two) pouncing on Pike.

"Yikes!" Kinkajou leaped out of the way of the slashing talons and snapping fangs.

"No no no! Stop!" Moon desperately began trying to pull them apart, but Qibli pulled her back just before a wave of fire rushed out of Darkstalker's snout. Fortunately, it missed Pike. Unfortunately, it hit part of Pike's huge store of highly explosive materials he had been using, including several dragonflame cactuses. The part he had hit caught on fire, but luckily didn't explode immediately.

"EVERYBODY GET OUT!" Qibli grabbed Moon and Kinkajou and pushed them out the doorway. Darkstalker and Pike understood instantly and dashed back out into the hallway.

Qibli checked to make sure no one else was in the cave and then ran like his life depended on it (because it did), bolting out of the burning room.

He didn't make it.

Chapter Six - Pyrrhia

[image]

There had been several large explosions in Pyrrhia up to this point. A few of them had been impressive enough to nearly level a small forest. Several of them had involved dragonflame cactuses. Two of them involved Jade Mountain Academy.

This one basically wiped the floor with all previous dragon-made explosions. In the Rainwing village, almost a day's flight away, trees shook so badly that several dragons were injured by falling papayas.

At the Sandwing fortress, deep in the Kingdom of Sand, Queen Thorn was writing a letter when what seemed to be a small earthquake knocked over her inkwell, spilling it all over the paper.

She sighed. "Capybara, could you get me a new piece of paper?"

He nodded and hurried off to find one.

Hmmm. That was a strange earthquake. If I would take a guess, I'd say that sounded an awful lot like an explosion...

Even in the Sky Kingdom, a tiny tremor was felt, just enough to notice, but not enough to do any damage.

At Jade Mountain, though, it caused more than a little damage.

Chapter Seven - Darkstalker

[image]

Darkstalker had made it to the prey center, a minute walk from the secluded cave where he had fought with that annoying Seawing, when the highly flammable stuff he had accidentally set of fire exploded. The very rock under his talons convulsed and threw him into a small tree which promptly collapsed on top of him.

And then the shockwave hit.

Darkstalker, and everyone else with him, were smashed against the cave wall with enough force to knock Kinkajou and Moon unconscious, bits and pieces of rock whizzing by.

The mountain shuddered so hard he thought it would collapse (It almost did, large cracks and many collapsed corridors were discovered in the aftermath), and flames burst out of the cave they had come out of, cracking the walls with the force of their exit.

When Darkstalker regained his breath, he tried to get up but found the tree still on top of him.

"Rrrrgh. Come on..." He pushed and strained for a minute, but the tree was perfectly content to stay where it was.

"Just get OFF of me!" He growled.

The tree got off of him.

In fact, it flew off of him so fast that it smashed to pieces on the opposite wall and rained leaves everywhere.

Darkstalker froze in shock on the ground for a minute, but was startled out of it when Moon woke up.

"Qibli!" She shrieked. "No no no NO!"

Moon ran towards the inert Sandwing, crouching at his side. Qibli

had more black than sand-colored scales, burns all over his body.

"Qibli! Wake up!" Moon was frantic. "Come on, wake up! You HAVE to be okay! Come back to me!"

"Moon," Kinkajou interrupted, "Can you hear anything from his mind?"

Hope entered her eyes, and she quickly took Qibli's skyfire pouch and put it to the side, closing her eyes.

Darkstalker noticed that Pike had disappeared right after the explosion.

"I... maybe... I think... I don't know, it's hard to... oh, I just don't know what to do!" She burst into tears.

"Let's take him into the infirmary," suggested Kinkajou, "We'll have the healers look at him." She was acting calm, which was odd, knowing Kinkajou, but the tremors in her voice gave away her concern for Qibli. "I'll go try to find a spot for him." Kinkajou ran off ahead of them.

"Carefully," Moon cautioned, trembling.

Suddenly, Clay burst into the cave. "Is everyone alright? What happened?"

Wordlessly, Darkstalker pointed to Qibli's prone figure.

"Oh," Clay realized, "Not alright. Put him on my back, I'll take him to the infirmary as fast as I can."

They warily lifted the Sandwing onto Clay's back, and he began carefully trotting towards the cave exit, wings up slightly to stabilize the dragon on his back.

When they arrived at the sick bay, there was a massive line of injured dragons packed into the caves, some laying on stretchers or sitting down. Most of them were conscious, fortunately, and none had injuries near as bad as Qibli, but some were still serious.

"Move over!" Clay shouted. "Make a path!"

They dashed into the cave, ousted an Icewing getting treatment for a bruised claw, and layed Qibli on the healer's table.

"He must have been pretty close to the explosion," observed a Skywing healer, unperturbed. Peregrine, the main healer, was a student who had requested an herbs and healing class. He was deaf in one ear due to an explosion during the Great War and wanted to help all those he could.

"He was," replied Darkstalker. A wave of guilt and pain and anger washed over him, just realizing that this was all Pike's (and maybe just a teensy bit his own) fault.

"Pike needs to pay for this," Darkstalker said to himself, snarling inwardly. He marched angrily down an empty tunnel, heading for where he had last seen the Seawing.

Chapter Eight - Kinkajou

[image]

Kinkajou found it very strange watching someone in a coma.

After all, *she* had been the one asleep for an undetermined period of time while the others rushed to wake her up. It had been weird being clobbered and put to sleep in one adventure and then waking up in a new one.

Of course, she was a *Rainwing.* You can always tell if your Rainwing is injured or just super asleep, they'll turn white if they're hurt.

EVEN SO, it was kinda cool that when Qibli woke up (she was sure that he would survive, if he didn't then he would be in huge trouble with Moon), that she and Qibli would both have been in a coma. Sort of like being in a secret society with someone, everyone having something in common.

"Is he going to make it?" Asked Clay.

"Of COURSE he's going to make it, Clay," Kinkajou said.

"I'm not sure," Peregrine responded, looking worried. "Time will tell."

Rrrrgh, Kinkajou growled inwardly, *I hate waiting. Oh well, I guess later is better than not at all.*

"Come on, Moon," Clay said gently. "Do you want to go back to your cave?"

"I..." Her voice broke. "I just... need to be alone. Just for a bit. Please?"

"Sure," he responded. "Come on Kinkajou, let's go."

Kinkajou gave her a quick hug, and then walked out of the room with Clay. Poor Moon... just when they had thought that things

were settling down, this happens. And with a Darkstalker present, too... even if he wasn't the *real* Darkstalker, it still was unsettling. Like Moon's prophecy all over again.

"I'm going to go flying to clear my head," she said. "It's too crazy right now to think correctly."

"That's the first time I've heard that from you," Clay said, amused.

"You don't know me *that* well." She grinned.

"Or, stuff like this doesn't happen a lot." Clay returned the smile ruefully.

"That too," Kinkajou replied. "I'll be back later."

I can't imagine what Moon is going through right now, she thought. *Of course, imagining what I would feel like if I lost Turtle is probably pretty close to how she feels right now.*

After several minutes of flying, Kinkajou saw something flash by through the rain. It was indistinguishable through the haze, but looked suspiciously like a dragon.

That's weird, Kinkajou thought, *Why would anyone fly in this weather? Aside from me, of course.* She decided to forget about it, but a faint sense of warning buzzed in the back of her mind. She ignored it for a few minutes, and then suddenly it got a lot stronger.

Probably because of the hostile snarl that tore through the darkness behind her.

Kinkajou spun and vaguely saw a dark, winged shape rushing at her through the mist.

"Ohhhh YIKES HELP!" She flapped her wings and dove towards the ground, spinning and trying to shake her pursuer. Shifting into camouflage, she shot skyward, vanishing into the clouds, desperately trying to escape.

Who, and why, in Pyrrhia would be attacking her? Actually, who would even know where she was?

A blast of fire shot by her left wing. The small part of her brain that wasn't engulfed in panic said, *ok, that means it's either a Sandwing or a Nightwing. Or, mayyyybe a Mudwing... but it's too cold out for that.*

Kinkajou swerved through a forest, hoping that would put off her pursuer, at least for a little bit. But no such luck, the mysterious dragon dodged through the trees with the agility of a Rainwing.

Thinking quickly, she put on a burst of speed and then spun in a tight circle around a large tree, ducking into a hollow between its roots and shifting to black-and brown camouflage. Covered in leaves, she watched, or rather heard, her pursuer thump lightly down outside the hole, sniffing around.

Kinkajou could hear her shallow, terrified breathing like a hurricane in her ears, her heart beating a thundering rhythm. But... she had the strangest feeling that she *knew* this dragon. But no one she knew would attack her... well, anyone near Jade Mountain, that is.

She heard the snuffling get close, and decided to attack. At this point, she had nothing to lose, and hiding only made the situation worse.

Kinkajou leaped out of the shadows, fangs bared and ready to spray deadly venom on her attacker. The mysterious dragon whirled towards her, snarling. And without a sound... it disappeared.

Chapter Nine - Luna

[image]

Luna was tired of waiting. Every time she asked Jerboa, her... caretaker? Hostess?... how much longer until Moon and Qibli would come back, the only answer she got was, "Soon."

She would have left by now if it wasn't for the fact that A, Jerboa had taken her in without a question and nursed her back to health, B, Luna didn't know where to go, and C, she didn't want to miss Moon and Qibli's arrival.

Whenever that arrival was.

Luna sat down in a small, sheltered cove covered by an overhang of coconut trees. It was her favorite place to nap, think, or do anything involving a need for peace. Which was a lot. Ever since she had arrived at Jerboa's secluded beach, she had been getting more and more restless, wanting to return to her home continent and free the Silkwings from their bondage at the talons of Queen Wasp.

Ever since Luna had fully recovered, she had been getting more and more restless, exploring farther and farther into the desert of the strange new continent she had so unexpectedly crashed into.

This place... what had they called it... oh, Pyrrhia. That was it. This continent had been practically a myth, the very idea of it had come from the long-dead Clearsight, who (according to legend) had showed up and saved the tribe by warning them of an impending hurricane. She could see the future, and wrote a book foretelling major events for the next two thousand years.

Unfortunately, the last prediction had been dated about 900 years ago, so everything bad coming they had no idea about.

Reeeeal helpful.

Luna stretched in her wings, letting sun shine down and warm her

up. It was strange here. All free and without anyone telling her what to do, it was paradise for her.

She thought of her brother, Blue, stuck back on Pantala. Luna wondered what had happened. Had the Hivewings captured him? Was he in a nice, cozy cave during his metamorphosis? Or was he stuck, trapped in the Flamesilk cave, where he would have no one to talk to when he emerged from his cocoon except the endlessly bickering flamesilks?

She would go crazy within a week in that place.
"Luna!" Jerboa called. "Lunch is ready!"

She rolled over and climbed to her feet. Luna was greeted into the hut by a strong, delicious smell emanating from a large cauldron in a corner.

"Mmm," she said, "That smells really good! What is it?"

"You tell me," Jerboa replied, handing Luna a bowlful of the stew.

She tasted it, thinking. "I'd sayyy... maybe some... uh... I don't know, but it's really tasty."

"It's scorpion with a bit of mouse and some cactus juice, plus some spices." Jerboa grinned.

Luna almost spewed a mouthful all over her. She managed to hold it in, fortunately for her dignity. She had to admit, even with the... less than preferable choice of ingredients, it was delicious. Luna finished the whole bowl.

"I think Moon and Qibli should be arriving any day now," Jerboa observed suddenly.

"How do you know?" Luna asked, hope dawning in her eyes.

"Just a feeling," she replied.

"Better than nothing."

"Mhm." Jerboa walked out of the hut and laid herself down. "I'm

going to take a nap, let me know if anything happens." She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Luna stared at the horizon, through the flaming sunset to where her brother, her love, and her life waited for her return.

Chapter Ten - Moonwatcher

[image]

Why didn't I see this coming? Moon thought to herself as she sat by Qibli's bed in the infirmary. *This kind of seems vision-worthy. I should have seen it... I could have warned him...*

Clay walked into the cave, interrupting her never-ending circle of thoughts. "Anything?"

She shook her head sadly, keeping her eyes focused on Qibli. Moon had removed his skyfire rock so that she might be able to catch any activity from the SandWing's usually hyperactive mind. She'd never met anyone with anywhere near as many thoughts a minute, which made it even more unbelievable that the normal river of observations, plans, and memories stemming from him had completely stopped.

While it wasn't quite different from the time between now and when she'd given him the skyfire for the first time, the knowledge that she should be able to hear *something* was very distressing.

A few minutes after Clay left to update the others, Kinkajou walked into the room, a frightened expression fixed on her snout.

Moon looked up, managing to give her a faint smile before looking back at Qibli.

"Moon," she started, her voice wavering. "I..." She trailed off.

"What is it, Kinkajou?" Moon asked. The fear in the normally bubbly Rainwing's voice was like nothing she'd ever heard before.

"Something really weird just happened," Kinkajou responded, glancing around the cave nervously. "I went out flying, and someone attacked me."

"WHAT?" Moon jumped up, temporarily startled out of her almost

trance-like state of sadness. "Attacked you? Who would... why would anyone do that?" As far as she knew, there was practically no one on the face of Pyrrhia who would have a reason to attack Kinkajou. It was almost impossible to not like her, and besides, why attack a lone Rainwing?

"It was either a Nightwing or a Sandwing, whoever it was had fire. But that's not the craziest part..." Her voice faded off again, obviously remembering the attack.

"What could be crazier than attacking you? Everyone you've made mad is nowhere near and isn't mad enough to fly all this way to hurt you." She started searching the minds in the school around her.

"Moon–" Kinkajou tried, but Moon cut her off.

"The Nightwings are all back at their new kingdom rebuilding, or in the Rainforest. Sandwings are... actually pretty close but I don't know of any–"

"MOON!" Kinkajou interrupted firmly.

"What?" She focused back on the terrified little dragon.

"I tried to defend myself, spray them with my magical death spit and stuff, and they–he–she–WHOEVER IT WAS–disappeared right in front of me." She shivered.

"What do you mean, disappeared?" Moon asked slowly.

"EXACTLY WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE IT MEANS," Kinkajou shouted.

"Well you don't have to RAISE YOUR VOICE AT ME," Moon yelled back, feeling extremely irritated at no one in particular. It had been a long day.

Kinkajou looked startled, then collapsed onto the floor into a trembling, quietly sobbing ball.

Oops, Moon thought. *I should not have done that. She's been through a lot, almost as much as me, maybe even more...* She crouched next to the miserable Rainwing, putting a wing over her back. "I'm sorry,

Kinkajou. I..."

"Me too. Sorry for yelling." Her voice came out muffled and haltingly through her sobs. She sat up and hugged Moon, and Moon wrapped her wings around her. They sat there for several minutes, each taking comfort in each other's presence.

While Kinkajou cried on her shoulder, Moon thought hard about the events of the day. The school was damaged, Qibli was in a coma, and Kinkajou had been attacked by a mysterious dragon with seemingly no reason to.

After a while, after the tears had stopped, they got up and said goodnight, walking slowly back to their respective sleeping caves.

Moon rounded the corner to her tunnel... and came to a screeching halt. The tunnel was dark, all the lanterns had been extinguished. Sunny especially would never let that happen, she wouldn't ever want the students to feel like she did when the Dragonets of Destiny were kept under a mountain.

Something deep inside Moon, from the depths of her foresight, told her not to go in. She cocked her ears and listened, straining to hear anything that might warn her, anything that might set off this feeling.

Something... something was breathing. Quietly, softly, but harshly.

Or was it the wind?

Her head started to pound, a vision headache pressing its way into her mind, but no vision came.

Clack. Was that a talonstep?

Silence.

She listened harder, not just with her ears but with her mind, searching for thoughts, emotions, *anything*.

Silence.

Moon sat for a moment, trying to convince herself that she was just being paranoid, that just some wind had put out the normally bright and cheerful lanterns.

Clack. Another sound. The breathing continued, seemingly closer.

Click. Talonsteps? Moon hoped not, almost ready to bolt.

More silence.

"Hello?" She tried, "Is anyone there?"

She looked harder, deeper into the darkness, into the silence, not quite sure why she hadn't run yet.

And inside that darkness... there were *eyes*.

Click.

With an explosion of fire, the dragon inside leapt out at her, claws outstretched, fangs bared in a hostile snarl. Moon ducked and rolled up against the cave wall, just barely missing the attacking dragon. Black scales flashed by as she dodged the oncoming Nightwing.

Her attacker hit the floor and spun, facing her yet again and tensing up to pounce.

"HELP," Moon shrieked, hoping someone was nearby.

The Nightwing jumped at her again, snarling, and she lashed out instinctively with her back talons, aiming for the dragon's exposed underbelly.

And just before they connected, the dragon disappeared.

Moon sat down against the wall, trembling and staring where her attacker had been a split second before. The vision headache was worse than ever, and she was too confused and startled to notice that all the lanterns were lit again, cheerily lighting the cave that had almost been her tomb.

Moon got up carefully, glancing around, too overwhelmed to note

the significance of what had just happened. She headed up towards the prey center. Maybe she could find comfort in the noise, with dragons all around. Silence was the last thing she needed right now.

She began walking up away from her cave, trying to clear her thoughts, when the vision headache roared through her mind, bringing along with it pictures of dragons dying, Jade Mountain falling, thunder, lighting, and storm. The old line she'd dreaded, that she'd heard over and over, came rocketing through the noise like a crack of thunder:

Beware the darkness of dragons. Beware the stalker of dreams.

Beware the talons of power and fire, Beware the one who is not what she seems.

Something is coming to shake the earth. Something is coming to scorch the ground.

Jade Mountain will fall beneath thunder and ice,

Unless the Lost City of Night can be found.

Moon sat up, shocked, as the vision receded. But... they had FINISHED that prophecy. They stopped Darkstalker from killing all the Icewings, and kept Jade Mountain from falling! Besides, ever since then, she hadn't heard from this prophecy, and it would repeat in her head until it had been fulfilled.

This was bad.

Very bad.

Chapter Eleven - Qibli

[image]

Ow. Everything hurt.

Qibli tried to crack open his eyelids a tiny bit and then quickly shut them, wincing at the pain from that movement, then forcing himself to lie still as his body slowly woke up. That alone was not an easy task, given that after a few days, unmoving on a bed, he felt so full of nervous energy but still so tired that he could barely contain the twitchiness that would doubtless be painful.

He decided to try and clear his head from the coma-fog by thinking. There had been the fire... he had pushed Moon out of the cave, and Kinkajou. Qibli desperately hoped they were unharmed. They should be, he had a vauge memory (more like a dream) of Moon visiting him, she had seemed to be fine. He didn't know about Kinkajou.

I wonder how much damage the explosion caused, he wondered. There had been a deep rumbling and the rock walls around him had rapidly begun cracking a split second before the main wave hit, that had warned him to duck into a small hollow. Qibli estimated that he had been less than ten seconds from the cave exit, and the main force of the blast had been deflected past his hiding spot, but still had hit him and torn him out of the hollow.

That was the last thing he remembered.

Qibli forced his eyes open and slowly took in his surroundings as his eyes began to focus. He looked around, then noticed Moon next to him, holding his talon between hers and quietly sobbing.

That didn't bode well. He wasn't surprised that she was here with him, but the fact that she was still mourning concerned him. She seemed physically shaken, more than the blast should have done. Qibli knew her well enough to know that she should have gotten over the shock by now.

As his vision continued to sharpen, he began noticing that she had various cuts and bruises on her wings and back, fresh wounds overtop of the ones from the explosion. It looked like she'd hit a wall, maybe she'd fallen? No, that wasn't likely. It looked more like she'd been... attacked.

It was time to get some answers.

"Hey," he said. Always a good start.

Moon's head shot up, and several expressions – surprise, disbelief, shock, then joy – flitted across her face in a matter of microseconds. "Qibli!"

Fortunately for his throbbing head, she managed to keep the noise down to a quiet shriek.

Moon quickly jumped up and hugged him as he sat up, wrapping her wings around him (not too tightly) and twining her tail around his.

"I'm so happy you're awake!" she whispered in his ear. She sat down next to him and words came gushing out, "Everything just happened so fast and you weren't breathing and I couldn't hear anything and I didn't know if you'd come back and Kinkajou got attacked and then me and I heard the prophecy again and I didn't know what to do and I still don't!" She burst into tears, leaning against his shoulder.

"That sounds like a lot," Qibli observed, smiling at her. "Start at the top, please."

Between sniffles, Moon explained what had happened after the explosion, about Kinkajou's attack, then about her own, and then about the prophecy returning. "I don't know what to do, Qibli," Moon said after she finished.

Qibli decided to not think about the prophecy right now and focus on the more immediate issue.

"You said it disappeared? That means it couldn't have been real," he pointed out reasonably. "However..." he tapped his chin thoughtfully, "Since it happened to Kinkajou too, it mean's it's

something more than just a hallucination or something. But it didn't touch either of you, and vanished right before you touched it, so it must not be real, or at least not physical."

Moon nodded.

Just then, Qibli noticed shouting coming from the caves outside the infirmiry.

"Make way!"

"Move!"

"Get out of the way!" Several voices grew steadily closer. A second later, a group of dragonets burst into the cave, along with Clay, who appeared to be carrying a small Skywing. Reaching an empty spot, he carefully slid the red and orange dragonet down his wing and onto the bed.

Qibli strained to get up, and with Moon helping him, he slowly limped over to the wounded dragon's bed. They looked over the heads of the many students crowding around the injured Skywing.

Moon choked back a gasp.

The red they had seen wasn't scales, but blood, ebbing from dozens of claw slashes and gouges all over the poor dragonet's body. She was still breathing, but just barely.

"What happened?" Moon asked, her voice trembling.

"I'm not sure," Another dragonet, about the same age as the wounded one, spoke in a small voice. "One moment Sparrow was flying next to me over the forest, then BOOM, she falls like she got hit with a boulder. I thought I saw something dark hit her, but I just don't know..." Thrush trailed off, tears forming in her eyes.

Deep in the subconscious part of Qibli's mind, something chimed. There was a connection somewhere. This was no random occurrence. He felt with absolute certainty that this was the beginning of something big, and something terrible.

"Will Sparrow be alright?" The trembling dragonet asked Moon.

"I hope so, Thrush." She put a wing around her, pulling her closer. The tiny Skywing buried her snout in Moon's shoulder.

Moon looked up, her gaze beyond the walls of the academy, far past the horizon and deep into the future.

"I hope so."

Chapter Twelve - Winter

[image]

"Kinkajou, please come out." Winter was standing at the entrance to her sleeping cave along with the new Icewing, Aurora. He had been trying for the past ten minutes to get Kinkajou to come out of her hammock so that she could join the others in a meeting.

The only response he got was mumbling that sounded like: "Go eat a smokeberry."

Rrrgh. Come ON, Kinkajou, don't be a lazy Rainw– Winter caught himself partway through the thought. Then he caught himself catching himself, because she *was* a Rainwing, and if she was being lazy then–

You know what? Never mind. It was all a bit too complicated for the time being.

"Kinkajou, our winglet is meeting up, you need to come out," Winter tried again. "I swear, if you continue your ridiculous refusal to exit the cave, I'm going to-" He was cut off by a hostile snarl that emitted from Kinkajou's hammock. He growled back, rather annoyed.

"Winter," Aurora put in, "If she won't come out, why can't we come in?"

He glanced over, ready to point out all the flaws in her plan, when he realized she was correct. There wasn't anything stopping them from coming in to have the meeting.

"I... actually, I suppose that would work" Winter shrugged noncomittantly. "That was my next idea anyway."

Aurora raised an eyebrow skeptically.

Winter decided to ignore it her disbelieving expression and focus on

the task at hand. "I'll go retrieve the rest of our group." He trotted quickly away. He glanced back, but Aurora was sitting in the cave entrance. It seemed like she was... conversing with Kinkajou. He was tempted to go back and see how she'd gotten the grumpy Rainwing to talk, but decided that leaving and then coming back immediately would look odd, so he continued away.

He eventually found the group in the music cave. They were conducting themselves in a rather silly manner, banging on drums and blowing into didgeridoos and playing all sorts of other loud, unnecessary instruments of noise. Several Rainwings were even dancing, flailing about and rapidly shifting through many different colors, all of which were altogether too bright for any dragon in their right mind.

He caught one of his talons tapping along to the beat, and quickly stilled it. But not in time, as Qibli seemed to take notice, from up on the large drum set alongside Moon. He grinned down at Winter and rolled his eyes.

"Moon! Qibli! Darkstalker!" His voice hitched slightly on the last name; it was altogether too soon for any references to that evil animus. Unfortunately, it was too loud in the cave for any voice to be heard, so he was forced to climb up past the whirling dragonets up to Moon and Qibli.

"WE ARE GOING TO MEET IN KINKAJOU'S CAVE," Winter shouted in the Sandwing's ear. "SHE WON'T COME OUT."

He nodded his assent and gestured to Moon and Darkstalker to follow him and Winter. They picked their way out of the music cave, another Sandwing took Qibli's place at the drums and began banging away enthusiastically. *Disgraceful creatures,* Winter thought, intentionally not noticing how much fun they were having.

The walk back was decidedly awkward, at least for Winter and Darkstalker. Moon and Qibli walked comfortably side by side, talking in hushed tones and laughing quietly so as to not disturb the students studying in the caves nearby.

Winter eyed the Nightwing warily. He wasn't quite sure what to

make of this new dragon. He knew some of those feelings stemmed from the rather horrible experience there had been with the last Darkstalker, but he still couldn't shake that feeling of slight apprehension.

The black dragonet caught him staring, and shot back a questioning and somewhat annoyed expression. They soon arrived back at the sleeping cave, and Winter stopped to knock on the wall, to let Kinkajou know they were there. The others went in without stopping, leaving him standing out in the hallway.

"Here we are," Winter announced, a bit belatedly.

"Well, thank you," Qibli raised an eyebrow from inside the cave. "I never would have noticed."

"Oh shush," Moon batted at his snout, "Let's just get to business."

"I don't like this business," Kinkajou shivered.

"I don't like it any more than you do, but we can't just ignore it, can we?" Qibli pointed out.

Kinkajou sighed, settling her wings. "I guess not."

"So, what do we have factually?" Moon asked.

"Three dragon attacks, all on the same day." Qibli counted on his claws. "The prophecy is back, and we've had an explosion, although I doubt that's connected. Any theories?"

Aurora put up her talon, ready to say something, but glanced quickly over at Darkstalker and decided not to.

Darkstalker had an idea. "What if it's because we don't have our animuses–animi–whatever? Turtle and Anemone?" He was thinking hard. "It's a perfect time to attack without any retaliation."

Qibli considered it. "It's possible that that's why they happened now, but it doesn't explain why they happened. Always look for the motive, and you can usually figure out the rest once you have it."

"That's the problem at hand, however," Winter put in. "I can't think of any reasons for attacks on the school, at least not that we've noticed. It could involve some other dragon, although it doesn't explain why two of our Winglet were targeted, along with a young dragonet."

"I could see a way for that." Qibli tapped his chin thoughtfully. "It could be a form of intentional collateral damage, to hide the real target in the carnage."

"Hmm." Moon closed her eyes. "I don't see how the prophecy fits in all of that, though. I mean, we had mostly everything covered. It's not like there's another Lost City of Night, is there?"

That question hung in the air. Winter racked his brain, trying to think. He was sure that there had only been two homes of the Nightwings, the original one on the Talon Peninsula, and the newer one on the volcano.

But records only went back so far.

"I'll be right back," Kinkajou got up and dashed out the door.

"What is she doing?" Aurora asked no one in particular.

Qibli shrugged. "I have no... actually, I might know." He tipped his head, thinking.

Several minutes later, the Rainwing rushed back, breathless and blazingly multicolored. "Here," She dumped a small pile of scrolls in the middle of the sitting dragonets. Moon picked one up and read off of its title.

"Before The Scorching - Tales of Ancient Pyrrhia." Moon looked up at Kinkajou curiously. "How do you think this... OH." She had obviously realized something.

"What is it?" Winter asked. He was beginning to see the idea, but couldn't be sure.

"What if there was an even older Nightwing home?" Moon asked the group.

"What do you mean, 'another'?" Aurora questioned suspicously.

"What if the Nightwing's 'original' home wasn't the original? What if there was an even more ancient place that they moved from... what if that's the 'Lost City of Night' we have to find?" Moon glanced around earnestly.

Qibli nodded. "That's what I thought as soon as you read that scroll. There's no records back that far, only stories."

"Well, let's have a look at these stories," Aurora picked up a scroll and began reading.

Winter found one labeled "Millions of Scavengers" and skimmed through. It contained quite a few fanciful, overdone guesses and vauge records about a previous race of Scavengers that had dominated the continent until dragons nearly extirminated tham.

He tossed it aside, dismissing it as a credible source.

Qibli, however, flew through a few scrolls and began to see a pattern. "From what I've seen, there are rumors suggesting an idea, although they are just rumors. It says that back, before the Scorching, there were a lot fewer dragons on the continent–and a lot more scavengers. I don't really quite believe all the theories of extremely advanced races of scavengers, though." He shrugged, and Winter gestured impatiently for him to go on. "However, it does have a reasonable theory that at least due to the overwhelming numbers of scavengers, the small tribes of dragons lived closer together, still in their respective kingdoms, but fairly near the center of the continent."

Moon peered over his shoulder at a map on the page that indicated the placement of the original tribe homes. "It looks like the Desertwings – I guess that's the Sandwings – and the Nightwings lived quite close, although the Sandwings managed to stay further out in the desert due to the smaller number of scavengers."

Kinkajou joined in. "And look at this," she ran her claws lightly over the map, "The desert was a lot smaller. Actually, it looks like a lot more of the continent had thicker forests, so most of the dragons

lived in the forest."

Aurora frowned. "Seems like an awfully detailed map for just being speculation."

"Well, it's a 50/50 chance," Qibli thought, "Either it's so detailed because it *is* speculation, with all the other stories being so outrageous, or..." He left the thought unfinished.

Winter ran this all through his mind, heartbeat quickening. *The oldest home of the Nightwings...* This could be huge. It could be the one in the prophecy! Who knows what ancient treasures could be hidden there? Then he stopped himself, another ominous thought pervading his mind.

Who knows what ancient *dangers* could be hidden there?

Chapter Thirteen - Tsunami

[image]

"You're doing WHAT? And going WHERE?" Tsunami paced around the cave angrily, talons clacking loudly as she stomped in circles. "You are NOT going GALLIVANTING OFF like the last FIVE HUNDRED TIMES and getting yourselves CAUGHT by EVIL DRAGONS–" She cut herself off with a growl.

Kinkajou glanced over at Moon and whispered loudly, "I TOLD you she'd react like this."

Moon made a frantic shushing gesture, but not before Tsunami noticed. Furious, she rounded on Kinkajou. "WHAT was that? That I'd react like WHAT?"

"Well... like you are now! All mad and shouty and unnecessarily FREAKING OUT." Kinkajou made a general gesture at her.

"You know what? EVERYONE QUIET. This is NOT HAPPENING, you are NOT going anywhere. END OF DISCUSSION." Tsunami growled.

Clay opened his mouth to ask a question, but he must have seen her stiffen angrily, so he shut it again.

Which left Tsunami in a strange quandary. Because now that the question was unasked, she couldn't help wondering what it could been. Suddenly, there was a nagging sense of incompleteness. She tried to ignore the feeling, but it persistently made itself known.

Tsunami waited a few moments, but no question was forthcoming. The only sound was the clicking of talons as the Jade Winglet exited

the cave. Finally, she could bear it no longer.

"WHAT?" The question exploded out of her, with a bit more force than she had intended.

Taken by surprise, Clay jumped a few paces back. "What?"

"That's what I'm asking," Tsunami replied irritably. "What?"

Clay peered at her with a look that you give to someone when they have taken leave of their senses. It did not improve her continually rising temper.

"What?" He asked, now completely puzzled.

"Don't keep PARROTING me!" Tsunami fumed. "Stop repeating everything I say! I asked you 'what', so don't ask me 'what' back, do you understand?"

Clay thought over this question for a second or two, then replied deliberately: "No."

Tsunami took a deep breath, barely restraining herself from smacking the Mudwing with her tail. But before she could continue, Clay forestalled her with a raised talon.

"What 'what' are you asking me?" He twitched his wings, obviously seeing how unclear the question was. "Or in other words, why are you asking 'what'?"

Controlling herself with an enormous effort, Tsunami said, very precisely, "You where about to ask a question."

Clay frowned. "I was?"

She nodded. "You were. I saw you open your mouth to do it."

"Oh." He responded. "What was it about?"

Tsunami was speechless. She counted to ten, and finally found the ability to speak. "That is what I was saying 'what' about. To ask you what you were about to ask."

Clay thought over this. "I wasn't about to ask you 'what'."

"What?" Tsunami had a brief suspicion that he could be in the middle of a gigantic leg pull, but quickly dismissed the idea.

"What what are you asking what about?" Clay was now completely confused.

She let out a long sigh. "What, if I may use that word again, where you going to ask me?"

The bewildered Mudwing drew breath to answer, then hesitated.
"I forget," He said. "What were we talking about?"

Tsunami sighed, this time inwardly. "Never mind." She headed out towards the door.

"Why do you think they won't make it?" Clay called to her.

She spun around. "What?"

He wisely chose to ignore the fact that they were headed into dangerous territory with that word again. "The Jade Winglet did something like this before, and came back fine. What makes you think they won't be able to this time?"

"I just... I'll think about it, okay?" She continued out the door.

"Alright. Just keep that in mind." Clay walked out the other way, probably going to the prey center. *Thinking,* Tsunami remembered, *makes him hungry.*

She then realized that her stomach was growling too.

Later, she thought.

On the way back to her private cave, she bumped into Sunny.

"What was all of that shouting about?" Sunny asked, concerned.

"The Jade Winglet wants to take off and go to some place they think is an 'older home of the Nightwings' or something along those lines.

Also, Clay was being a doofus." Tsunami responded.

"Don't be mean to Clay," Sunny reprimanded her. "Why do the Jades want to go there? If it even exists, it would be almost impossible to find and would probably be buried."

"I... don't really know," Tsunami said. "All I got was some unclear reasons having to do with 'schoolwork' and 'history' and 'saving the world' or whatever. But the world is already saved, and they have plenty of school here." She crossed her front talons.

Sunny looked doubtful. "Maybe you should figure out exactly what it is before yelling at them. You're the big important Head of School, so it's your decision. But that's what I would do." She continued off down the tunnel.

Sarcasm from Sunny? Now that was something Tsunami couldn't ignore. Maybe she should look more into it.

Later, she thought again. She needed to eat.

Chapter Fourteen - Qibli

[image]

"So," Qibli began as the rest of the dragonets filed into their cave, "I think we all know what we have to do now."

Moon was nodding, Darkstalker shrugged, and Kinkajou bounced lightly on her talons.

He continued, "We have to sneak out."

"We should go to bed– wait, WHAT?" Kinkajou said at the same time, turning several different colors. "No no no we can't, Queen Glory said if she ever hears of me escaping again, she'll tie me to a rock for days!" She glanced around frantically, looking for agreement.

"Kinkajou..." Winter paused, "Isn't that the entire point of sneaking out? It wouldn't be sneaking if someone heard about it. While it may be somewhat duplicitous, we still have to do it."

"But... you're just going to LEAVE me here? Or get me TIED TO A ROCK??"

"Three moons, Kink!" Qibli grabbed her shoulders. "Calm down! You're acting like we didn't do this before. It'll be fine, and if there's nothing at the supposed older Nightwing city, we'll just claim that it was a misunderstanding."

"Um," Darkstalker started, and all eyes turned to him. "I think Tsunami was pretty clear. Shouting 'YOU ARE NOT GOING' is difficult to misunderstand."

Moon gave him a hard look.

"That's... just my opinion..." He subsided nervously.

"Wait," Kinkajou stood up and shook her wings. "What about Turtle?"

"What what about Turtle?" Moon responded.

"What?" Kinkajou made a confused gesture.

Qibli, who had heard some of Tsunami and Clay's exchange a few minutes ago, quickly intervened, spreading out his wings to distract their attention. "I think she means, we should probably get Turtle."

The Kinkajou nodded, turning ocean green and blue, the same color as the absent Seawing's scales.

"Well, I suppose that will have to be our first destination," Winter thought. "Although how we'll get a message to him, I don't know."

"Oh," Qibli remembered something. "I actually have one of his writing slates. I can write to him and hope he notices it."

Moon frowned. "Don't they only work one way, though?"

He shrugged guiltily. "I... may or may not have switched them without him knowing."

"Qibli!" Moon whacked his wing with hers. "You'd better give it back to Turtle when we see him!"

He nodded meekly. "Yes, mother."

Moon whacked him again.

"If you two are quite finished," Aurora interrupted, "We have some leaving to do."

"I second that," Winter raised his talon.

Qibli spread his wings. "The Icewings have spoken."

"Hold on," Kinkajou ran over to her hammock, grabbing a pencil and paper out of it. She quickly wrote something on it, then stuck the note in their scroll rack. "Ok. I'm ready."

"What was that?" Darkstalker asked.

"Just a note telling the guardians what we're doing, so they don't

panic and think we're dead." She paced impatiently in a circle. "Come on already, let's go!"

"*You're* telling *us* to go? A minute ago you were the only one protesting this," Moon raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, well, I'm not now, so let's GO already!" Kinkajou waved her talons in the air, turning a bright yellow.

"Alright then," Qibli interrupted. "Let's go!"

They quickly exited the cave, walking surreptitiously through the halls. Once, Qibli had to stop the winglet quickly as Tsunami passed through a doorway in front of them. Kinkajou started whistling.

"What. Are. You. Doing." Darkstalker hissed out the side of his mouth.

"I'm whistling," She whispered back.

"Well yes, we can hear that, but why?" Moon poked the musical Rainwing.

"When dragons try to be inconspicuous, they whistle. It goes that way in all the scrolls." She poked Moon back.

"Well yes, that's exactly why we don't want to be doing it," Qibli pointed out in a low tone. "They'll think you're up to something. Just act like you know what you're doing and don't try to sneak. If you act like you're supposed to be there, people will think you are."

"Ohhh," Kinkajou fell silent.

"Much better," he said.

Five minutes and about twelve near misses later, they popped out into the open air. Qibli took a huge breath of fresh air. "I'll write the message to Turtle, and then we can go.

He pulled out the slate and a map of Pyrrhia. They had marked where the supposed Night City was, at the beginning of the Diamond Spray River, near the foot of the Claws of the Clouds

Mountains. Qibli quickly wrote a message to Turtle:

URGENT

We have a new prophecy. Meet us at start of the Diamond Spray River, the southern tail. Will explain when we arrive.

He thought over it, then added as an afterthought: *Kinkajou will be there.*

Moon peered over his shoulder. "Was that extra bit necessary?"

Qibli grinned. "Probably not, but it gives him extra incentive."

A few moments later, the the Jade Winglet was winging their way north to the Sky Kingdom, soaring over puffy white clouds and snow-peaked mountains.

After several minutes of silence, Moon glided over to Qibli, a concerned look on her face.

"What is it?" He asked, mind running through the possible options.

"It's Darkstalker," She responded, glancing nervously up and the dragon in question. "His mind is suddenly... very weird. I can't describe it exactly, but it seems like I'm only hearing really shallow thoughts."

Qibli frowned. "When did you notice it?"

Moon thought for a bit. "I guess a while ago, when we first gathered to talk to Tsunami, but there was too much going on for me to actually realize it. Now that we're in the air..."

"You can really hear it," Qibli finished for her. "It wasn't this way anytime before now?"

She shook her head. "No, it was quite abrupt. It almost seems like he's... guarding his thoughts, in a strange way. The few dragons I've heard blocking their thoughts didn't have anything like this." Moon tipped her head. "Also, I get a faint feeling of... not-rightness when I get near him. It feels like... animus magic. But he's not an animus...

is he?"

"I guess we'll have to see," Qibli decided. "If he is, that could be either quite helpful or..." He trailed off, not willing to complete the idea.

"Another Darkstalker." Moon finished, shivering.

He thought through the options. Ask Darkstalker? No, that would be too abrupt and he probably wouldn't respond. Just wait and see? That could work, but it would just let him go longer undisturbed, and could yield potentially disastrous results.

Then Qibli's head snapped up.

Turtle was an animus.

Moon's vision had Turtle facing down Darkstalker.

That could only mean one thing.

Darkstalker was an animus... and he wasn't on their side.

Chapter Fifteen - Qibli

[image]

This was bad.
Very bad.

Qibli had no idea, but that was the second time those exact thoughts had run through a dragon's head in the recent few days.

He also had no idea what they were going to eat for dinner.

"But I'm HUNGRY," Turtle complained. "I flew... well, flew and swam, but same thing, all the way from the SEA KINGDOM without stopping, and now you want to keep flying on?" He squelched along the riverbank of the Diamond Spray River, pacing in a nervous circle. "I have several questions, but not until we eat. I prefer not to think too hard before dinner, it's not good for my health."

"Turtle," Kinkajou giggled, "When did you turn into Clay? All you've been talking about for the last few minutes is food."

The woebegone Seawing's stomach grumbled. "Since I started getting all this *exercise,"* he emphasized. "Did I not mention all the flying? And the swimming?"

Kinkajou turned back to Qibli. "He'll live, let's keep going."

Turtle made a surprised squeaking sound, a shocked expression fixed on his snout. He glanced at the effervescent Rainwing, not-quite-glaring-daggers at her.

Kinkajou just smiled sweetly back.

Winter cleared his throat. "Now that that's settled..."

Qibli nodded. "Yes, that is *settled*." He shot a meaningful look at Turtle. The Seawing sighed but nodded his assent.

Just as they were turning around to take off and fly, Qibli just heard Turtle mutter under his breath, "I don't see why we couldn't eat, though..."

The Sandwing sighed. "Kinkajou, do you mind...?"

An indignant "OUCH" quickly followed, preceded by a loud thwacking sound.

As they soared onward towards the setting sun, Qibli took a deep breath of the crisp, cooling air and absorbed the spectacular view. The oranges, reds, and deep blues of the sunset emanated through the mountain peaks as the sun kissed the horizon in a vast display of nature's finest painting.

Qibli thought over the past several moons. Life had... not been what he'd planned. He'd simply wanted to go to school, learn a bunch of stuff, and then hurry back over to Queen Thorn and keep helping in any way possible. Simple as could be, nowhere to go off track, right?

Well, that was the false statement of the century.

But the deviant flight pattern that had become his new life was... actually, pretty awesome. Without the hectic craziness that seemed to weave through the past year or so, he would have never gone on so many fantastical adventures, experienced so many new things, or met... certain dragons.

Qibli smiled at that thought and glanced down at Moon, gliding alongside Aurora and immersed in conversation. He wondered what she was hearing in the new Icewing's thoughts. He shook his head, thinking hard. It was hard to get a read on this new dragon, she seemed almost like Kinkajou (but a bit less energetic). He thought it over, trying to cross-reference her with all the other Icewings he'd met. It seemed that they all carried something... what was the word for it... colder, he guessed.

Qibli mentally rolled his eyes at the pun, but all the same, they all did. It wasn't exactly something harsh or evil, just an internal stiffness and propriety that seemed ingrained in all of them, and

although it wasn't always prevalent, it eventually turned up sooner or later. Qibli had yet to see it in her.

And Darkstalker... he seemed harmless. Harmless, but with a iron ferocity somewhere deep down, a fierce streak that he almost never used, or buried very well. As to his other properties... Qibli had yet to find a way to define him. It was almost like Turtle used to be, being extremely inconspicuous, and yet seemingly the center of cosmic power, sort of a don't-look-at-me-but-you-really-should feeling.

He frowned. It was hard to pin down, and it gave Qibli a sense of queazy unease that had nothing to do with the bad fruit he'd accidentally eaten that morning.

Moon flew up next to him, brushing his wing with hers. She looked over at him, her expression searching. "What's on your mind?"

He grinned. "There's a question I never thought I'd hear from you," he replied, flapping his wings and soaring over and around her, settling back into steady flight on the other side.

Moon gave him a knowing smile. "And when you try to distract me with jokes, I *know* there's something going on up there."

Qibli mentally raised an eyebrow at himself. Had he really become that easy to read?

"Just thinking over the past couple moon cycles," he made a slight, general gesture. "Just how much my life has changed. I'm definitely not who I used to be."

She nodded, meeting his eyes encouragingly. "Sometimes, change is good. I mean, look at me, I'm not the quiet, shy dragon in the corner who doesn't know anyone and doesn't talk to anyone." Moon stretched out her wing, brushing Qibli's with hers. "Thanks to you, and everything that's happened, I feel a lot more... whole, I guess. Like I'm not afraid to live how I'm supposed to."

Qibli smiled back at her. "And I'm certainly glad for that."

They flew on in companionable, comfortable silence as the sinking

sun set the sky in darkening flame around them.

Just as the last vestiges of the sun dropped below the horizon, just as night fell... Turtle suddenly stopped his flight, staring at something. "Guys..."

They all swung around, forming into a loose circle. "What is it, Turtle?" Kinkajou queried. The others nodded, reinforcing the question.

He pointed towards the ground, towards something that looked faintly familiar, a collection of bumps and rises scattered across the earth. They could have passed for normal deviations in the ground, but with the winglet out on alert, it quickly drew their attention.

"I think..." He hesitated.

They all looked where he was pointing, and gasped quietly when they noticed it.

"Three moons," Qibli said. "That must be it."

Moon covered her mouth with her talons, wide eyed. "It has to be. The Lost City of Night... is right below us!"

Chapter Sixteen - Winter

[image]

"So... what are we looking for, exactly?" Turtle queried as they glided slowly over the series of vague lumps in the ground.

"Um..." Qibli landed on a small hill. "Not entirely sure, to be honest. Something that looks like it could end the world, maybe?"

Winter snorted. "Well, thank you for clearing that up." The Icewing was feeling a slight letdown as they took in the extensive series of mounds below them. He had been expecting something more dramatic, perhaps an ancient monster coming out to attack them, or perhaps some mysterious ruins to explore.

However, all there seemed to be was lumps in the ground of old buildings. Extremely entertaining.

Kinkajou poked at a few stones that were poking out of one of these mounds of earth and rubble. "Does this look like it could end the world? Ooh, maybe it's enchanted or something." She eyed the brick critically. "Apocalypse rock? Hello?"

"I suppose this is like last time," Moon mused. "We have to just wait until we're thrown into whatever it is we're supposed to stop. We won't be able to find it on our own."

"True," Qibli agreed. "I guess we could make camp now, it's near sundown."

"Mmm," Kinkajou made a small noncommittal noise. "Do we have to sleep in the ancient lost city thing?"

"Well, if this ends up being the first prophecy," Winter speculated, not quite recognizing that they were still working off of the first one, "We'll probably need to be close to the center of the action," he glanced around at their silent surroundings. "Or the lack thereof."

Kinkajou frowned, turning a nervous, tired green, but plopped down on the soft grass, curling into a protective O. "I still don't like it."

"Neither do I," Aurora chimed in. "But it's necessary, I suppose."

"Thank you, Aurora," Qibli nodded in her direction. "I'll go see if I can find us some decent firewood." He jumped up and flapped off into the growing darkness towards one of the sparse nearby trees.

"Well then," Turtle harrumphed. "I'll go catch some food, since that seems to be everyone's last priority right now."

Kinkajou perked up. "Ooh let me come with you! I bet I'm *excellent* at catching fish. Me first, me first!" She bounded lightly off the ground and glided down towards the creek at the foot of the hill.

The Seawing humphed again, muttering something about "energy" and "Rainwings" and "bananas", and flapped tiredly after her.

Aurora tentatively walked over to lie down near to Winter, making sure to claim a spot for the night.

He looked quickly over and back, decidedly *not* taking notice of her proximity to him, or her shy glances she stole once in a while in his direction.

"So," Winter cleared his throat and stood up, a little more abruptly than he had intended. "Perhaps we should formulate a plan of action for tomorrow?"

"That sounds like a good idea, probably," Darkstalker chimed in.

Moon yawned. "I don't know how much thinking I want to do right now." She rested her head on her front talons.

"Maybe more sleeping," Darkstalker agreed quickly, glancing over at Moon.

"How about we compromise," Aurora suggested. "We'll make a sort-of plan for tomorrow, and then get right on with sleeping?"

"That sounds reasonable, mostly," Winter mused, not trying to seem too eager.

"What's this, planning without me?" Qibli flapped over the quartet of dragonets, dropping a sizable load of logs and kindling in the center of the circle. He swung around and landed neatly beside Moon, settling down into the soft grass. "What'd I miss?"

"Literally everything," Darkstalker grinned. "We decided whether to go to sleep now or make a plan for tomorrow."

"Oh dear," Qibli frowned in mock disappointment. "We can't have that. Although if you're deciding about anything involving sleep, you should probably have Turtle for that." He gestured down the hill to where the glowing Seawing was splashing about, desperately trying to catch Kinkajou as she dashed around with a large fish he had caught.

"We should actually go get them, though," Moon observed. "This is a group discussion."

Winter didn't quite hold Kinkajou and Turtle's decision-making logic in the highest regard, as with Turtle it usually involved the least movement as possible, and with Kinkajou it involved whichever method incorporated ridiculously bright colors and loud noises.

"I'll do it," He stood up and trotted off down the hill. Winter didn't want to be involved in an argument about who should go fetch the effervescent pair.

Aurora quickly followed, "I'll come too. Wait up!" She quickly caught up to him, then gasped, gazing at the fiery, quickly darkening sunset. "Oh wow..."

He looked away for a second, at the last vestiges of the sunset fading away, then glanced back to the stream.

"Oh no..." Winter stopped in his tracks.

"Hmm?" Aurora stepped to his side, following his line of sight.

Turtle and Kinkajou were gone.

A Note

To all the people screaming "MORE CHAPTERS PLEASE" and "WHYYYY ON THE CLIFFHANGER"... you are not forgotten. Neither is this book, I promise. I know it's been forever since I last updated, and I'm really sorry about that. I got into other book series, and where I am in life right now there's just not much time to write. What little I have is being entirely devoted to The Island (go check it out!), my first original story.

That said, I do hope to at least get another chapter underway and published through my upcoming ~~winter break~~ sometime soon, as I'll actually have time to sit down for five minutes and not have to go rushing off to something else.

So, thank you to all my readers who are sticking with me, it means a bunch. In the meantime, though, please do keep up with The Island, I have personal incentive to keep that one alive and so most of my effort goes to it. I hope you'll put up with me and my crazy schedule. Thanks again! I'll do my best to get this one back to life.

A Note: Pt 2

Hello, readers.

Yeah, it's been a few years. It's 2026. I just graduated college. Life is crazy.

But I'm back! Ish. Darkstalker's Return may remain dormant for a while longer, as I've been out of the WoF sphere long enough that it's hard to remember a lot of needed details. However!

I am planning to begin a book/series called something along the lines of "Impulse". The idea is that each time I have a chance to write, I'll sit down and add a chapter to this book. No planning, no outlines, just writing and creating as it comes.

It'll likely be terrible, but it might just be enough to restart my love of writing, as it's been terribly battered and bruised from college essays (lol).

Whether I truly return or end up ADHD-ing my way into a different project, I want you all to know that I still haven't forgotten my stories, or my readers.

With love,

Pyrrhian/Campaigner